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WHAT IS THE PRESENT ATTITUDE OF COLLEGE STUDENTS TOWARD ORGANIZED RELIGION?

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I

It is not easy to give any answer to this question which will be sufficiently accurate to be illuminating. It is never a simple matter to discern what youth is thinking or feeling, either on those matters which it believes to be important to itself or those which it is aware we propose or desire it should regard as such. There is always a gulf fixed between middle age and youth though for the most part age only dimly comprehends it. We who have grown up remember our childhood with sufficient and rather sentimental clearness and we have a vivid realization alike of the trials, the responsibilities, and the privileges of age. But the years of our adolescence tend to fade from our memory. Those days of swift transition, of continuous experimentation, of unrelated, irresponsible, and ephemeral expansions left no enduring marks upon the tablets of the mind. For the most part we have so far forgotten their significance that we do not even realize they have passed out of our recorded consciousness.

This largely accounts, I think, for the characteristic impatience of our self-protective prudence with the gay and careless destructiveness of newly awakened life. This is why age

has more of jealousy than sympathy for youth and why it is more prone to expect adolescence to understand and pay tribute to what appear to it the self-evident standards of maturity, than to remember the need and difficulty of thinking itself back into the morning of life. Few older men can deal with youth imaginatively. Hence professor and student live side by side in outer decorum and superficial companionship, but the real springs of action and the scales of value by which youth builds its life are often carefully concealed.

This is particularly true when the discussion deals with matters of faith and conduct. The sense of the maladjustment between an older and a younger generation is strongest here. Youth does not understand its own attitude toward religion any too well. It is both self-conscious and self-exacting and these traits increase the inhibitions induced by the sense of the obtuseness and remoteness of older lives. Moreover, youth is not unaware that the reasons age brings forward in the support of established institutions are often more ostensible than real, that it is not so much the intrinsic worth of organized religion as it is its by-product of stability, comfort, and professional security which endears it to its defenders. *The Profits of Religion* is a grotesquely unfair and one-sided book but there is truth in it and just the kind of truth that youth can perceive. Youth thinks that age demands more of it in the way of intellectual and moral docility than it, itself, is prepared to give.

In short, a community of young people strives on the whole toward higher standards of thought and conduct than does the armored and respectable middle age around it. However fantastic and perverse some of its contemporary expressions may seem, nevertheless it is generally distinguished by ethical insight and moral sensitiveness. Youth sometimes fails dreadfully but it is more honest with itself regarding its failures, realizes their nature more keenly, and takes them more seriously than does the older life about it. Hence the

spiritual atmosphere of a college or a parish, which offers the only medium for the exchange of real thought and emotion, is clouded by false values. The young idealists in it are tongue-tied and uncertain except when talking among themselves; the older formalists are too exacting, especially of other people, and too expressive, at least in public. Hence the initial suspicion with which youth regards both professional advocates and conventional forms of religion; hence the voluntary expression of religion among the better undergraduates is meager, reticent, not easily analyzed. Quite aside from any other reasons there is something inherent in the nature of the relationship and the different status of the lives composing it in a college community which makes a just and accurate common understanding difficult.

The first thing, then, to remember about such a discussion as this is the peril of quick answers. We are hearing a good deal at present about the godlessness of modern youth and the immorality of the present generation. But easy summations of undergraduate attitudes, either by way of censorious condemnation or sentimental praise, are all likely to go wide of the mark. We should understand youth better if we were more confident of it, more critical of ourselves; if we approached it with a mixture of disinterested and expectant observation and some personal humility. There is something truly ironical in the apparent simplicity of academic relationships, something almost fatuous in the bland acceptance on the part of older men and women of the mere appearances in youth of virtue or vice, piety or irreligion. There is something, too, profoundly unjust in the easy generalizations, the all but absolute judgments by which an established order betrays its resentment at the critical scrutiny or frank hostility of young life.

II

Let us attempt then a dispassionate analysis, from the point of view of the churches, of the undergraduate community.

We shall discern at once three conventional attitudes toward organized religion on the part of college students. They are all of them classic; they illustrate, in the realm of the religious interests, corresponding reactions having the same characteristic emphases and approaches which may be found in the economic and social and political life of the time. First: there is the natural conformist. He is the boy who is temperamentally "good," who identifies religious faith with external moral practices. He issues from average, middle-class American life, the son of a thrifty, practical, unimaginative household. He has had a sober and careful bringing up. He has been taught to read the Scriptures, to say his prayers, to attend church. There is often a frank and naïve strain of commercialism in his piety; he has been schooled to remember that social disgrace or academic failure, or material ruin, are the punishments of irreligion and immorality. He largely conceives of religion in the terms of group respectability; assumes that the content of the moral law is practically unchanging from generation to generation. Wrong and right are simple and self-evident; they are mutually exclusive territories, separated by clear boundary lines. Faith and character are achieved by remaining in the right territory.

Boys of this group often have substantial sanity, a rather shrewd and sensible scale of values. But their imaginative deficiencies, their narrow range of desires and interests, with the accompanying intolerance and complacency make them unlovable and relatively negligible figures among their peers. This group has sent many recruits into the ministry in the past. Some of them have become saints and have deepened and enriched the life of the profession. But on the whole they have not strengthened it. They have not had enough creative ability to be great preachers. They have approached the ministry with a too simple notion of its duties; it has been strangely mechanicalized in their minds. It has appeared to consist of preaching pleasantly an accepted mes-

sage furnished ready to their hands, of making routine calls, of gently perpetuating existing organizations—even if with a slowly diminishing momentum! Instinctively they have expected the institution to carry them; the office to make the man, not the man the office. It was such innocuous, if complacent conformity which the late William E. Godkin had in mind, when, referring to a distinguished foreign university, he observed that it was an ideal place for those youth who were chiefly interested “in lawn tennis, gardening, and true religion.”

The numbers of these men, however, are diminishing in the college just as middle-class religion, with its passion for respectability and its identification of faith with conventional conduct is, in proportion to the growth of the population, everywhere diminishing as well.

Second: there is the group of the young institutionalists. They are a more characteristic product of our present society and therefore more significant to our discussion. They come from a richer and wider environment, are more developed personalities, than their conforming comrades. They do not share in the moral naïveté of the first class; sometimes they do not share its moral scruples either. The boys of this group identify religion with a half-romantic, half-mystical allegiance to impressive and picturesque institutions. They link up this allegiance in their minds with subscription to creed, a sort of class allegiance to the formulae promulgated by an imperial and established organization. There are certain classic statements of the Christian faith. They move the imagination, both subdue and elevate the minds of sensitive and reflective youth, partly by their aesthetic and mystical appeal, partly by the very prestige of their antiquity. They are the confessions of faith of a splendid and imperial standing order. They appeal to the best in the aristocratic impulse, its sense of the continuity of life, its perception that you must not divorce the present from the past, its understanding of

the slowly refining, carefully garnered deposit which makes up all that is best in human experience.

These youth are not moved by any terrific moral struggle or by the evangelical passion for soul-saving. The prophetic note in them is absent. They are Churchmen; social and religious Conservatives. Sometimes when they grow older they, like John Neville Figgis, carry side by side with medieval forms of religion quite radical views in political economy and social science. But essentially religion is to them a perpetuation of an established and authoritative order.

When these men enter the ministry, they become not so much the shepherds of sheep as spiritual governors of parishes. The world regards with something of reluctant admiration, something more of covert hostility and distrust, their amalgam of the urbane manners and self-assurance of this world, with the offices of priest and preacher. Boys whose religious instinct expresses itself in these ways are increasing among us and they are turning naturally to the Roman and Anglican communions. The main current of our age flows steadily and relentlessly against the institutionalist and his type of religion. But there are many cross-currents in any generation and a new exaltation of institutional religion is one of them which is discernible at this moment. As the American home becomes more and more sophisticated and society becomes older, more highly developed and rigid in its customs, allegiance to all established institutions grows among us. It represents the determined effort of a relatively completed and well adjusted social order to defend itself, its achievements no less than its privileges, from the crudeness and destructiveness of the new forces now struggling upward in society. Most men who have gained anything of permanence hate and fear change. They identify the accompaniments of a new order, its bohemian living, its flippant and reckless iconoclasm, its attacks upon special privilege with the order itself. This,

they think, is all there is to it. So they withdraw into the citadel of institutional orthodoxies.

A fair number of college men who are now entering the ministry are of this group. It does not matter much what learning they receive in college which seems to vitiate either the historic pretensions or the intellectual statements of their faith. They have already cast in their lot with the older order, they are not inquirers so much as they are partisans. They will by no means be a negligible force in the coming generation. By no perceivable possibility can they become the leaders of the age into which we are now advancing. But they will skilfully and resolutely oppose it; they are far more formidable opponents than their simpler brethren of the first group, and they will have considerable influence.

Third: there is the young humanitarian. He is a common and obvious type of undergraduate, more in evidence a decade ago than now, the boy who expresses his religion through its substitutes, who meets his spiritual problem by evading it. He puts effects in the place of causes; practical efficiency takes the place of spiritual insight. The ardent if superficial humanism of recent years has produced the youth who identifies religion with social reform, piety with organized benevolence, and spiritual leadership with administrative efficiency. To work is to pray, social service is character, a rarefied amiability is faith.

Such a lad is a past master at planning a missionary campaign, engineering a student conference, and "promoting" a Bible class. He knows how to "swing it right." He sees nothing incongruous in organizing a risqué undergraduate vaudeville show to raise money for the support of a settlement house. He will be found teaching at a down-town mission, or acting as scoutmaster for local gamins, or installed as a religious work director. He is a wholesome and aggressive youth, friendly, rather too approachable, amazingly able and

resourceful in practical affairs. He has character, is not imaginative, is terribly at ease in Zion. It is largely from this group that the ever-to-be replenished ranks of student Christian association secretaries, graduate secretaries, student-volunteer leaders, are recruited.

These men, for the most part, accept the essentials of the present order. They do not scrutinize the intellectual and emotional sources of our present religious and economic structure. They would rather mitigate its abuses than reform its principles. They are natural if unconscious pragmatists. Their passion is for action; they want always to be "doing things." The goal of social service, which is ever before their eyes and their passion for "results" makes them superficial leaders. They take refuge from the difficulties of thought in the opportunities of action.

A few of these men, not many, go into the ministry. Generally speaking, it repels them by its emphasis upon religious passion and spiritual insight. Also, they are contemptuous of what seem to be the lax business methods and practical inefficiency of the average church. They are not so large a group in the college as they were before the war, for its brutal dislocations shook this type of youth out of his notion of salvation by expansion and reformation by machinery.

III

Probably all the men of these three groups which we have been discussing represent when combined decidedly less than half the undergraduate body. The remainder of it, which is a substantial majority of the whole number, forms the group which is most significant to our purpose. It can be classified under two heads. First: there are the modern pagans. A large number of contemporary undergraduates are not irreligious today, they are non-religious. They are neither hostile nor contemptuous as regards religion; they are indifferent to it, they know nothing about it, they are relatively incapable

of experiencing it. There is much truth in the neglected Calvinistic doctrines of election and predestination. Probably all men cannot be saved; some of them are antecedently incapable of salvation. Such boys as I am describing are the natural product of the materialism and commercialism which represents one-half of the American character of the moment; they are neither very much better nor worse than the homes from which they issue. But this group of obtuse and unawakened lads is one of the most significant factors in undergraduate life, more characteristic of the immediate problem which confronts the college and the nation than any one of the other groups we have as yet mentioned. The grosser forms of immorality are not common among them, they are more vulgar than vicious, hopelessly secular, but not bad. Their language is callously profane and has a sort of a-moral coarseness about it. Their literature is principally *Snappy Stories*, the *Saturday Evening Post*, and the sporting pages of the daily prints. Their most natural occupations appear to be striving for some club, indulging in college gossip, or indefinite discussion of athletic events in which they themselves took no part, and alternating between the "movies" and innumerable dances.

In short, they are men in whom the aesthetic, intellectual, and spiritual interests are almost wholly undeveloped and to whom organized religion makes no contribution and for which they feel no slightest need. Religion in general would seem to have no *quid pro quo* to offer them. The number of these men has very largely increased in the American college. They are changing its habits of thought and conduct, its scale of values as regards courses, the whole aesthetic and emotional level of the group. They undertake their four years of college life mostly for social or practical reasons and they leave college nearly always for business or for law.

If organized religion wants to test out how much of a power it still is in the college, let it see if it can evangelize this group. Success or failure with them would be an actual measure of its

vitality, a real snatching of brands from the burning. The other groups we have discussed are temperamentally disposed toward some sort of acceptance of the churches. This group is one of the two for whose salvation the churches specifically exist. We should never draw many leaders from its numbers; can we recruit the laity from it? It is significant that at present this group remains almost wholly untouched either by college preaching or by the Y.M.C.A. activities of the undergraduate body.

Finally, there are the intellectual and aesthetic radicals. This group probably comprehends by far the largest number of valuable men in the college community. It is composed of the boys who have both intellectual and emotional equipment and along with their brains and their heart, they have the accompanying spirit of the adventurer. Such youth are natural come-outers. They are possessed of character as well as intellect. Their moral code is often not that of their elders and they are sometimes rather brutal in their disdain of inherited prohibitions. But they have a code of their own, they govern their lives, keep their appetites within reasonable bounds, respect themselves. They have a passion for intellectual integrity and for accurate appreciations and judgments. They are unsentimental by nature, and dislike, as they dislike few other things, the boy who is only temperamentally or emotionally religious. They have a disconcerting habit of ignoring the considerations of expediency or the sensitiveness of their interlocutors when scrutinizing a conviction or analyzing an institution.

Now the most significant fact we have yet touched upon is that these men also are almost wholly outside the influence of organized religion. The first reason for this is either the lack of any religious training in their homes or church in their earlier youth or, as is more often the case, their having received a training which has been both mistaken and inadequate in content. Neither Sunday school nor minister ever pointed out

to them the difference between scientific and religious truth. Scientific truth is the exact agreement of observation and judgment with fact. It is an affair of the intellect, it calls for mental accuracy, is capable of precise demonstration. Ethical truth is the harmonious adjustment of conduct to the moral and social constitution of man. Insight into the nature of this adjustment is as much, if not more, an affair of the imagination than of the mind; the allegiance to ethical truth might be called more of a practical than an intellectual experience. Moral truth is not capable of mathematical demonstration, but only of a gradual and relative verification in experience. Religious truth again is the perception of the right relations between man and the universe as a whole. Such truth is generally presented to mankind in the form of personalities, it comes in the guise of personages who by their imaginative insight, their spiritual intuitiveness, have worked out or grasped an attitude both toward men and God which satisfies and interprets the lives and consciences of those who behold it. There are speculative, mystical, and aesthetic values in religious truth which do not enter into scientific observation of fact. The imagination plays a part here which it does not play with the natural investigator.

Now such fundamental distinctions are primary elements in religious growth and education. But for the most part they are not given by churches or parents. Able youth are sent to college believing that the truth of religion stands or falls with historical accuracy of the gospel narrative or with the correctness of inherited systems of opinion. They have been encouraged to identify religious truth either with theological beliefs or with faith in some inerrant writings or with the concept of an omniscient Christ. When the church says that Jesus is the truth, it is talking of truth as a form of personality, as a system of relations, and of the Lord Jesus as being, by the common consent of human experience and observation, all that a man ought to be in

these relations. He is truth in its final form, a true person. All this, these men have not been taught; they suppose that what the church asserts is "true," is some particular brand of theological or ecclesiastical orthodoxy. Thus, their teaching before ever they come to college has given them no preparation for what they will find there; it not only has been deficient but it has been positively false.

The inevitable of course happens when these boys of potential intellectual and aesthetic power are introduced to the free intellectual processes and stimulated by the sudden expansion of scientific knowledge which come to them as undergraduates. They quickly perceive how far the thought and feeling and knowledge of their day have outstripped the creed and practice of ecclesiastical, as of other contemporary, organizations. They perceive that to some real degree the churches are outmoded in conduct and reactionary in belief. They are aware how far contemporary psychological and social science has advanced beyond the consciousness of most preachers and how dreadfully it discredits their usual concepts regarding nature and human life. They have an acute and somewhat exaggerated perception of how discarded is the philosophic view of the world which lies behind classic systems of theology and they see how inconsistent with the ethics of Jesus is both the theory and the practice of our imperialistic and ruthlessly competitive society. They are aware that consciously or unconsciously the laity support the churches quite as much for social and economic as for religious reasons. In short, they perceive that their inherited ethical, theological, and ecclesiastical orthodoxies will not stand the test of scientific investigations and they think these are to be identified with religion. Hence, not understanding the nature of religious truth they soon lose any sense of the value of it. In the beginning, they look with scorn upon the minister as the official of an order of ideas which he must know is no longer defensible and they regard the church as a drag upon society.

Now these are able boys. And before they are through their Senior year they have become more or less aware of the difference between religion and theology, an art and its science, the self-verifying moral and spiritual experience of the Lord Jesus and any particular philosophic or practical implications with which men have clothed it. They have come to perceive the difference between religious and scientific truths. But it is then, for the most part, too late to reclaim them, because their active lives have already gotten substitutes for the faith which they discarded. They are absorbed in intellectual pursuits. Just as we are told of Darwin that his early and vivid delight in music became entirely atrophied through long absorption in purely scientific pursuits so the interest of these youths in the distinctively religious expression of their ethical and imaginative life has perished. They give themselves to philosophy or economics or political science; they are still devoted men but their devotion is to wisdom, they worship truth, not the God of truth. They are young men of character, but it is respect for themselves and humanity, not awe and loyalty in the presence of a holy being, which is alike the motive and the sanction of their conduct. Some of them give a genuine discipleship to the old classic ideals of beauty and of justice. They prefer this to the personalized and too often the timid and obscurantist religion of the churches.

Other men in this group, not possessing as great intellectual power or as keen scientific interests, hold aloof from organized religion for aesthetic reasons. They are sensitive to the various aspects of beauty. Indeed, boys who understand the significance and value of the aesthetic world are rapidly on the increase in this group. To them the stenciled walls and carpeted floors, the anomalous furnishings and frock-coated officials, the popular romantic and quite irreligious music of the average Protestant sanctuary are both ludicrous and repellent. With all the joyous cruelty of youth they pitilessly analyze and condemn it.

More and more the college is training these abler youth to a critical appreciation of the intimate and significant relationship between sublime ideas and deep emotions and a restrained and beautiful, an austere and reverent, expression of them. The very age itself, with its immensely increased interest in the dramatic and plastic and descriptive arts, tends more and more to feed their imaginative life and to make the standards of that life more consciously exacting. But our average non-liturgical service has not much to offer their critically trained perceptions. They find little of beauty or of awe in the Sunday morning service. Indeed our church habits are pretty largely the transfer into the sanctuary of the hearty conventions of middle-class family life. The expressions and attitudes of life which are precious to such youth, the subtle and precise and mystical ones get small recognition here. They feel like uncomfortable outsiders or truculent misfits in the Sunday morning congregation. Therefore, partly for reasons of intellectual integrity and partly for reasons of a genuine and aesthetic distaste and partly because organized religion has been crowded out by other interests which also feed mind and spirit they avoid the Christian church. It does not seem to move in their world. They are quite aware that it tries to stand for, and once did stand for, real values. They, too, think those values are real but that they are no longer within its custody.

It is conceded that very few of the abler men in college today, either the students of distinguished intellectual or creative capacity, are turning toward the Christian ministry. It does not seem to me difficult in the light of what we have been saying to understand why. It is not because these men are devoid of religious capacity or of ethical loyalties. Quite the contrary; they are the men who are going to be the leaders of the higher life of their generation. But modern life offers many new professions and occupations into which imaginative spirits and keen minds may enter. The new engineering pro-

fessions, the opportunities of big business, give scope for the work of the constructive imagination and the analysis of the keen mind, which an earlier and simpler age denied. Political and economic reform calls for the highest moral and mental qualities. Hence it is not altogether consonant with the genius of our day that it should produce such conventionally religious spirits as medieval civilization gave birth to. Nevertheless, the general defection of this group upon the Christian ministry and the churches is gravely significant as to the probable immediate future of organized religion. For if we have lost our hold on men of this sort, then, whether or not we win the battle at any other point of the line, our real success in controlling the thought and feeling of society is problematic indeed. If we have lost these men as both laymen and leaders in the churches, all other gains are gravely diminished thereby.

It would not be true, I suppose, of this group, that they would say that the ministry is not a "man-sized" job. They began, in the first flush of intellectual activity in their Sophomore year, by saying that, but now they would be quite aware that religious and moral leadership of this generation offers a herculean task. But they have become indifferent to it and are rather of the conviction that the churches are neither able nor indeed anxious to really undertake it. There is plenty of dormant religious capacity in this group, much unexpressed spiritual ability. But it regards the only ministry possible for it in this generation, because the only one compatible with clear thinking and fine feeling, as one outside of the ecclesiastical institution. This is obviously a half-truth, by no means a perfectly just attitude. But then all human convictions are combinations of half-truths; vague hearsay, blank prejudice, fond fancy, are component parts of all our thinking and feeling. We shall never gain the men of this group by railing at them or by pitying ourselves for their unsympathetic attitude or by denying the large measure of justification that lies beneath it. If we ever do win back their allegiance

it will be by a generous and frank appreciation of those very gifts of intellect and character which have turned them away. And we shall make a grave mistake if we suppose that in any age of the world keen minds and tempered spirits have been shut up to our expression of the higher life.

My general attitude must be clear from the foregoing observations. The attitude of college students toward organized religion is very far from what we should like it to be, but the trouble is not so much with these young men as with our own organization. Able and sensitive youth are naturally religious. They are also naturally scrupulous that whatever of religion they bring themselves to openly espouse, shall be candid in spirit, intelligent in content, beautiful and dignified in expression. If there is to be again a warm and confident alliance between academic and ecclesiastical life and if the ablest youths are again to enter the ministry, the churches will have to change more than the colleges. In so far as religious institutions adapt their interpretations of religious experience to the world-view of today, according as they promulgate a moral code not formed to meet the problems of a vanished and simpler order of society but adapted to the new and urgent problems of an urban and industrial civilization, and in so far as they can recognize that the beautiful has as much place in life as the holy and the good, they will interest and attract undergraduate life. There is an infinite pathos in the wistfulness with which many idealistic boys regard the church today as an organization hostile to mental freedom, indifferent to beauty, and insistent on a procrustean morality; there is something deeper than pathos in the indifference and almost contempt which exists between so many youth in the coming generation and the Christian church. In their heart of hearts these boys would like to worship, to believe, to openly espouse a holy and a sacrificial life. If that be true, what is the reason the church can do so little with them?